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Pope Leo, You Can Do Much, Much Better Than This!

The Historical Foundation of Just War Theory

For approximately 1,600 years, the Christianized just war theory has maintained a core tenet: a just war cannot be an offensive war. This principle emerged about 400 years after Jesus, when Augustine and a group of politically and economically influential bishops integrated Stoic just war theory into the Church. Since its inception, this standard has dictated that an offensive war is a moral impossibility for Christians. Any killing that occurs within such an unjust conflict is considered an intrinsically evil act of homicide—specifically, murder.

The Strategic Importance of Defensive Perception

Historically, the principle that only defensive wars are legitimate was considered so sacrosanct that it dictated national policy. For example, during the lead-up to World War II, President Roosevelt went to extreme lengths to ensure that Japan was factually and perceptually responsible for firing the first lethal shot. Interestingly, history records that the United States actually fired the first lethal shot of the war on December 7, 1941, in the waters outside Pearl Harbor. Because the defensive-only principle was vital for public relations, this fact was intentionally obscured or denied until it received official acknowledgement in 2022. This history illustrates how deeply the 1,600-year-old principle—that any war other than a defensive one constitutes murder—was embedded in the hearts and minds of both Church leaders and the public in 1941.

The Attempted Redefinition of Defensive War

In the mid-20th century, the academic and scholarly class began to blur the distinction between offensive and defensive warfare. One of the most influential figures in this shift was the Methodist ethicist Paul Ramsey. In 1959, Ramsey argued that if a nation attacks another in anticipation of a possible future attack, the resulting conflict should be classified as a defensive war rather than an offensive one. Under this logic, a nation would not need to wait for the first shot to be fired to justify its actions. However, the Catholic Church rejected this line of reasoning, noting that it would effectively nullify the entire just war theory.

The Vatican's Resistance to Preemptive Conflict

In the early 21st century, proponents of preemptive war attempted to gain moral authorization from the Vatican. Prior to the 2003 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq,

members of "The Project for a New American Century"—including figures like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld—dispatched George Weigel to Rome. Weigel sought to convince Pope John Paul II and the Vatican hierarchy that a preemptive invasion was consistent with Catholic just war theology.

To the Vatican's credit, Weigel was never granted entry. He was forced to present his justifications at the American Embassy in Rome while Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger condemned the proposed preemptive war as gravely evil. In fact, the Pope spoke out against the conflict fifty-five times before it began.

The Moral Crisis of the Venezuelan Invasion

Despite this clear historical precedent, the Church's leadership in 2026 has failed to offer the same moral clarity regarding the preemptive invasion of Venezuela. When U.S. forces, including many Catholic service members, attacked Venezuela, Pope Leo responded with vague calls for "human and civil rights" and encouraged the faithful to "persevere in prayer". While the Pope called for serenity and expressed solidarity with those who died, his language lacked necessary moral weight. In the context of a high-tech invasion that resulted in the deaths of numerous Venezuelans, the term "died" is insufficient; by the standards of Catholic Just War Theory, these individuals were "murdered".

The Obligation to Name Evil

While some may view the Pope's benign statements as wholesome, they represent a significant moral failure. A grave evil has occurred: a murder operation conducted with the participation of Catholics at the highest levels of government and "boots on the ground". Journalists often discuss the invasion through the lenses of politics, economics, and global strategy, but it is the duty of the Church to use the language of the Gospel.

If the Pope does not find the courage to call murder by its name, those participating in the conflict will continue to believe their actions are good. The Petrine ministry carries a specific commission from Jesus to "feed my sheep" and teach obedience to His commands. Failure to speak the truth regarding the participation of Catholics in murder is a gross dereliction of duty. To lead people toward God, the leadership of the Church must move beyond secular diplomacy and fulfill its Gospel obligation to condemn unjust violence.

The traditional "just war" framework is like a narrow bridge designed to prevent humanity from falling into the abyss of unrestrained violence. When leaders begin to widen the definitions of "defense" to include preemptive attacks, they effectively dismantle the bridge's railings, making it all too easy for a society to slip into the very murder they claim to be preventing.